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SERIES: The Gospel Is
MESSAGE: Spirit-Empowered Unity
PASSAGE: Romans 15
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

So suppose one day, you had a really bad idea. And this is the bad idea: You thought to yourself, you know, I'm gonna go to church, and I'd just like to make a mess of things. Just really want to stir up some trouble. How would you go about it? Now, obviously, it's a hypothetical question. I do not recommend it. We don't want to do that, but in considering it, my hope this evening is that maybe we'll be on guard against it.

So how would you go about it? You wanted to cause some chaos, cause some confusion. I think some people might think, you know, the first thing I should do is I should go and maybe start to threaten a really important doctrine of the church, start to start to say something that isn't true and start to lead people to believe something that isn't true. And I understand why someone might think that'd be a good idea. But in a healthy church, I am quite confident that approach would quickly be met with resistance, because in healthy churches, people stand up for what is true.

I think a better strategy would be this. It would be to begin to whisper in the ears of people reasons to judge those that are around them. It'd be to begin to introduce, just whisper, just a little thought, that maybe this person's more, I don't know, superior to you. It would be to emphasize and maybe even foster this spirit that says things that maybe shouldn't be a big deal, I need to make a really big deal. It'd be to stir up disagreement. Because disagreement quickly leads to to disputes and to division, and division ultimately leads to disunity. That'd be the way to go about it.

Now, here's what's crazy, is I think that this is not necessarily a secret. I think that we know disunity and things that stir it up are very problematic. But it makes you wonder, why do we remain so susceptible to it? Why do we find so much disunity in the church? Why is it important? Why is it important that we as a church be on guard against it? That's what we want to talk about tonight.

Open your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 15. Romans chapter 15. We have two more weeks where we're going to walk through the text of Romans. We're going to reflect on it again a couple weeks after that, but we're going to cover all of

chapter 15 this evening. It's a lot of text. But as you turn there, just remember where we were last week. Last week, Paul reminded us or he told us about a very specific and significant conflict that was taking place in the church in Rome. There was conflict that was resulting in judgment and contempt and condemnation between two different groups within that church. There was one group that he referred to as those weak in faith, who struggled to step fully into all the freedom available in Christ. Then there was a second group—and just for the sake of each, we'll call them this: strong in faith. They were able to walk fully in that freedom. And this created division. Both groups were judging one another.

Now, Paul's overall counsel to that situation was, first, to remind every individual believer who it is that they serve, who ultimately is the master. All of us are followers of Jesus. We report to him. He is our master. We are his servants. But not only that. The gospel has freed us to be a servant of Jesus Christ. It's also freed us from the futility of life on our own, and it has freed us to also serve one another. To serve Christ by serving one another. That's what Paul talked about last week.

Now, as we turn to chapter 15, he's going to continue this call to unity. And in the first two verses of chapter 15, he really is going to re-emphasize what he has already said in chapter 14. So chapter 15, verse 1, he says:

> *1 Now we who are strong [that's the strong in faith, Now we who are strong] ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength [those who are weak in faith] and not just please ourselves. 2 Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.*

These two verses really are an exclamation point on what Paul has already said in chapter 14. It's a re-emphasis. The church, the community of God's people, is not to be a place where disagreement leads to division and, ultimately, disunity, especially on matters that Paul called disputable matters. Non-essential matters. When we disagree in non-essential matters, it's not to ultimately produce within us judgment and condemnation and contempt.

Now, rather than that, Paul says, specifically here in chapter 15, verse 1, the strong are to bear the weaknesses of those without strength.The strong are to bear with the weak. We said last week that we in the church, there's no room for competition or judgment in the church, because God alone is the judge. All of us answer to him, and we're all in this together.

So last week and again this week, Paul is calling us to walk in this journey of faith together and to do it in a way where we seek to help those who are weaker. We help them grow up in their faith. It's what it means to say, bear the weaknesses of those without strength. Going back to last week, that might mean that sometimes

if I have a very strong faith that allows me to walk in liberty and freedom. It might mean that for the sake of a weaker brother or sister, I might not always demand that I am able to express that freedom when I'm with them. I might lay that freedom aside for the sake of their faith.

Now, please understand, we talked about this last week and we just need to say it again. This is not a call for those who are strong in faith to agree with those who are weak in faith. Not what Paul is saying. This isn't a call for the strong in faith to take on the convictions of the weak in faith. That's not what he's asking either.This is a call to be a people of love, to seek what is good for one another, to seek what is good for our neighbor—and particularly our neighbor right here in the body of Christ—and to do that which edifies, which builds up, rather than tearing down.

Paul, ultimately here, is not calling for the strong in faith to embrace a weakened faith. He's calling the strong in faith to help strengthen the faith of the weak. To help them grow up, to step into the fullness that is available to them in Christ. That is the call. It to care for one another. Now, we admitted that this is sometimes a challenge because we are people who think of freedom as being or meaning that no one can infringe upon that. But here, essentially, Paul is subordinating, at times, subordinating Christian freedom to the love that we should have for one another.

Now, we mentioned last week, as we closed, when we partook of communion together, that really this is precisely what Christ did for us. We read from Philippians or we talked about Philippians, where Jesus didn't hold on, he didn't consider equality with God a thing that he had to hold on to. He let go of it. He let go of it. He humbled himself, took on the form of a servant. Humbled himself all the way to death on the cross. Therefore, Paul says, God has now highly exalted him. Paul continues now—he's going to remind us of this very fact. This is precisely what Christ did. Verse 3, he says:

> *3 For even Christ did not please himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

And what we talked about last week is what Paul emphasizes here—for the strong to occasionally set aside their freedoms for the sake of the faith of the weak. That is an active step of obedience, and doing for one another what Christ did for us. Jesus didn't please himself, Paul said. Instead, he took on reproach. He was disdained by those around him, suffered for the sake of the gospel. Suffered

because he loved us and because he knew the glory that was set before him. He knew what God was going to accomplish through the cross. So in order that he might save, he suffered, he lowered himself, condescended. And now it is through the gospel that God has now made it possible for us to live with him, and also do what Paul says here—be of the same mind with one another.

And ultimately, it is a call to unity, but I think it's a confusing one. What does it mean, exactly, to be of the same mind? How is it possible that we, as God's people here in this church, that we could possibly be of the same mind?

We need to start with what it's not. This is not a call to somehow an, I don't know, an intermingling of our mind, as if we become indistinguishable from one another. It's not that. It's not a call to uniformity. But it is called a unity. It's a call to unity that is the product of having each person, each believer's mind be shaped according to Christ.

See, we aren't uniform as Christians. We all don't look the same. But we are all being shaped by the same person. We're all being shaped by Jesus Christ. I think this idea takes us all the way back to the beginning of Romans 12 when Tyce preached and he talked about what it meant to be renewed in our mind. He said, be transformed, Paul said, by the renewing of the mind. A renewed mind is a mind that is no longer conformed to the world in its ways. It's conformed to Jesus Christ.

And each one of us, because of the gospel, we are able to step into that. We are able to be people with a renewed mind. And the result of that, the clear result, is that we would be a people—all of us very different, different backgrounds expressing Christ-likeness in different ways—but all of us united, bound together in Christ. That is what God calls us to as the body of Christ.

Christians are not uniform. We are not saying—we are not monotonously boring and like one another. But Christ comes in to our personality, to our mind, and starts to shape us after his image. And it all takes all these different, beautiful expressions. But ultimately, united. United because the person doing the shaping is Christ himself.

And what does Paul say is the result of that unity? The result of that unity is that God is glorified. That's what Paul said, that you may, so that with one accord, you may with one voice, glorify the God and Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ. What's it mean to glorify? It means to make famous. It means to magnify, to magnify God's reputation, to make him known, to make him look really good. And what Paul is saying is, unity enhances God's reputation in the world. It glorifies him.

So now, why would evil, why would Satan, seek to, to cause disunity? Why would Paul be so adamant for so many chapters now? We've been following this theme for a number of chapters. Why would he be so adamant, so persistent that the church maintain unity? The answer is because the unity of the church brings God glory. It magnifies him. God's reputation grows when his people are united.

Now, why does it bring him glory? The reason is because it is a fulfillment of his plan. It's what he always intended. God always intended, through Christ, at bringing unity between Jew and Greek, Jew and Gentile. These two people that were caught in division, these two groups of people, God would in Christ, glorify them, and in the fulfillment of his plan—I'm sorry, unite them—and in the fulfillment of his plan, he would glorify himself. That is what Paul is saying. And that's exactly what God has done. In drawing Gentiles to himself, he's united the two groups under one head, under Christ. And this was always God's plan. That's what Paul goes on to say.

> *7 Therefore [verse 7], accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. [That also brings glory to God.] 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision [that is the Jew] on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, "Therefore I will give praise to you among the Gentiles, and I will sing to your name." 10 Again he says, "Rejoice, o Gentiles, with his people." 11 And again, "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him." Again, Isaiah says, "There shall come the root of Jesse, and he who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in him shall the Gentiles hope."*

Paul uses four different passages from the Old Testament, covering all the major sections of the Old Testament, to emphasize this one overarching point: This was always God's plan. The gospel is a fulfillment of God's plan. It was always his plan to unite the two groups, Jew and Gentile, under the one man who is God, Jesus Christ, the one he calls the root of Jesse, so that praises would be lifted up from the earth by all people to the God who deserves glory. That was God's plan.

And that's what he's done in Christ. And that is why unity of these two groups is so absolutely critical. So absolutely critical. Always been a part of God's plan. Jesus came and he was a confirmation of God's promises to the fathers. That's the first thing Paul said. And then for the Gentiles, he was the way that it became possible for the Gentiles to glorify God, because it was the way God extended his very mercy to the Gentiles.

One man who himself was God brought these two divided peoples, brought them together in himself. The gospel is the fulfillment of God's very plan for his very glory. He's made famous when the body of Christ is unified, Jew and Gentile alike.

Otherworldly, that type of unity. And there's not enmity, there's not hostility. That type of unity is something that is born of the Spirit of God, made possible by the gospel.

Now, as Paul brings all these thoughts to a conclusion, he bursts out in a word of benediction and blessing. Verse 13, he says:

> 13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

May the God of all hope, fill you with all joy, all peace, in your believing, in your faith, so that you might abound in hope. In other words, hope just bouncing all over you. People full of hope. Empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit. You might recognize this verse. I don't know if you pay attention, but every day or every weekend when you drive out, if you go out towards 70th Street on the back of a sign, it's right there. Romans 15:13. It's blessing. May the God of all hope fill you with not some joy, all joy, and peace in believing, that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, verse 13 marks the formal end of the body of the letter. Romans began with a very long introduction, a very lengthy body of the letter, and now, as we turn to verse 14, Paul turns to a very long conclusion to his letter. I think as we continue, though, what we find is that Paul continues to teach, and this topic of unity—how critical it is, how important it is–still remains front and center for Paul. So in verse 14, for quite a bit of time now, Paul is going to give us a summary of his ministry. So I'm going to read verses 14 to 21 here. Paul says:

> *14 And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.*

So just real quick, notice that Paul's affirming the steadiness, the health of this church in Rome. They're having disputes. But overall, this is a healthy church he wants to affirm. Verse 15:

> *15 But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. 17 Therefore, in Christ Jesus, I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. 18 For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, 19 in the power of signs and wonders, and the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round*

> *about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. 20 And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; 21 but as it is written, "They who had no news of him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand."*

I think it is profoundly true that outside of Jesus Christ, no one has impacted the world more than the apostle Paul. And what's astounding about Paul is the humility he displays. What you see from Paul is that Paul took no credit. Paul understood that what was happening through his ministry was a mark of the incredible movement of God. God's Spirit was working. And none of it was because Paul was so amazing. None of it was because Paul was so articulate. His results were because God had acted. God supplied power. God moved and started a massive movement among the Gentile peoples throughout the Mediterranean world.

This was Paul's method. He'd go into a place, he would speak, he would proclaim, but sometimes he'd use words that weren't all that impressive, quite intentionally. He would do those things, and then he would wait to see God's power at work. He would trust God's hand. He would trust that God was working, that God's power would show up. And therefore, because of that, when results did come about, he didn't boast in himself, or in his own wisdom, or in his words—he boasted in the one who actually accomplished something. He boasted in God. God got the credit. Christ got the credit. Christ got the credit.

When we began Romans, we talked about these two verses that I think are, you know, if I don't, I don't know, that Paul had life verses. But if he did, Romans 1:16 and 17, I think, would be pretty good candidates. I don't know if you remember, but we talked about how the Roman numerals up there—last week, someone asked me again about those—that's 1, 16, and 17. Referring to these verses that are the theme verses of Romans.

Now, there Paul says, I'm just going to read it again. I'm not ashamed of the gospel. For it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it, in the gospel, the righteousness of God—that is God's own righteousness, and also the way God is going to make people righteous—the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. As it's written, the righteous shall live by faith.

I feel like we could look at Paul's life and we could just impose those two verses right over his life as a commentary on his life.Paul was absolutely unashamed of the gospel. Proud of the gospel. Unrelenting in his proclamation of the gospel. It marked his very life. And the reason is because he knew the gospel was the power of God to save. The power to deliver people from the deep darkness of their sins. It is the answer the world needed and continues to need.

God's power to save. It had changed Paul's very life. What he then described, he went on and talked about—God's power in action. God's power in action, first for the Jew, he says in Romans one, 16, and 17. And then we see in his summary here, it started in Jerusalem, and for the Greek also, all the way to Illyricum. Illyricum is as far as we know Paul got at this point, all the way around Albania, Croatia. North of Greece. Paul traveled thousands of miles because he understood the importance of the gospel.

Now that's what people deeply hope for. The only way one can be saved, the only way one can be delivered, from the weight of sin and death. And so Paul had a call upon his life and he was faithful to that call. But all the while, what we see in his little narrative is that he ultimately trusted God. God got the credit. And I think for so many of us, that's a model of how we should approach the very calling God has given us.

None of us are Paul, but all of us have been placed by God, and we're all called to participate in the ministry that he is doing in the world. And as we do that, we should be filled with confidence because the way God works is, we speak what is true, and then we see God's power show up. He's the one that brings about change. Our calling is to be faithful. Wherever we are, whoever God has put in your place to, at the right time, in a wise way, let them know about the truth of the gospel. And then after you say "this is what is true," you just let it go and you trust God. And God's power gets put on display as he changes life, after life, after life, as he brings about the results. Paul continues, verse 22, he says:

> *22 For this very reason, I have often been prevented from coming to you;*
> *23 but now with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have*
> *for many years a longing to come to you 24 whenever I go to Spain—for I*
> *hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when*
> *I have first enjoyed your company for a while—*

Paul—it's astounding—he can say, "Hey, there's no more place for me in these parts." But Paul didn't retire.He didn't kick up his feet and rest on his laurels, say, "Look what I've done." Paul was adamant to continue on. And Spain at the time was basically the end of the world. That's as far as the Roman Empire stretched at the time. And so Paul said, "I'm going to Spain," but before that, he's going to tell us he has something he needs to do first. That's what he tells us in verse 25.

> *25 but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. 26 For Macedonia*
> *and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among*
> *the saints in Jerusalem. 27 Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are*
> *indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things,*
> *they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. 28 Therefore,*

> *when I have finished this and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. 29 I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

So Paul was headed to Jerusalem. And while it's not completely easy to see here in this text, I think this whole idea of unity was still pressing on him. It was still a passion of his. We know that, from reading about this contribution that was being gathered, we know that in 2 Corinthians, in the book of Acts, Paul was on his way to deliver what he calls a contribution.

Now we know at this time in Jerusalem, there was severe famine in Israel, in the land of Israel as a whole. And that was creating suffering, certainly, and also poverty. Now we also believe that this was a time where persecution was ramping up in Israel. And so Jewish Christians were being persecuted, maybe were being put out of work. Therefore they were suffering, they were poor, impoverished.

And we know from Paul's journeys, he had been hard at work when he was in Gentile churches. He was hard at work gathering what he refers to as a contribution. He did that in Macedonia. He did it all the way down in Achaia. So Macedonia is kind of northern Greece, Berea, Philippi, all the way down to Achaia, which is where the church in Corinth was. Paul's been gathering this contribution so that he can deliver it to the saints, the poor among the saints, in Jerusalem.

Now, for Paul, I think this contribution certainly had a very tangible charitable purpose. It was to help those in deep need, and that is a good thing. But I think he also had a more significant purpose, for him, a hope of what would come out of this. See, for Paul, this gathering, this contribution that would be delivered from Gentile churches to the mother church, so to speak, the church in Jerusalem—for Paul, he hoped it would symbolize and strengthen the fellowship and the unity brought about by the gospel. He hoped that they would somehow see that we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

So in anticipation of delivering this contribution, Paul then, as we close this chapter, asked those in Rome to pray for him. Verse 30:

> *30 Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, 31 that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; 32 so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company. 33 Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.*

So as we finish up this chapter, there's just two things I want to draw your attention to. And the first is the way Paul talks about prayer. Paul called their act

of prayer a way of striving together with him. Striving together with him. A way of entering in, a way of participating in Paul's very work. And the only thing I want to ask is: Is that how you think of prayer? It's a challenging image. Sometimes we come to prayer and we say, "I need to give this to the Lord," and we do it somewhat passively. But Paul here is like, "I want you to join in the fight! I want you to lock arms with me. I want you to join me in the expansion of the gospel. I want you to join me in this striving for unity in the body of Christ. Here's how you can do it. Join me in prayer."

Prayer is a way of entering in and participating in the very work of the gospel. Paul called them to pray, and specifically, he wanted them to pray for a few things. First, he wanted them to pray that he would be safe. Essentially, that he'd be rescued from the hands of unbelieving Jews who sought to bring violence upon him. That's the first thing.

But notice the second thing that he asked them to pray. He asked them to pray that this contribution that he would bring, the one that he hoped would symbolize and strengthen the unity that is to exist in the church, he asked they pray that it be accepted by the saints in Jerusalem. In other words, Paul was concerned that when he brought this, call it a love offering, this gift, this expression of love, this contribution, he was concerned will they receive it? Will they accept it? Or will they reject it?

You know, these are a people who are going to be asked very soon when Paul arrives to receive a gift, to receive a contribution, to receive an act of charity from people that they look down upon. That's their former way of life. They look down upon them. They didn't respect Gentiles. And now the big question that Paul has is, will they receive this offering? Will they receive this contribution? Paul's concerned about that. So we ask them, pray for that. Pray for that because if they would reject it, then the very unity that Paul hoped it would foster would remain a hope, and it wouldn't be a reality. Paul was adamant, adamant that unity exists within the body of Christ.

Now, I don't think for any one of us it's too hard to know exactly why it's possible that the Jewish Christians wouldn't receive it. I think it's difficult sometimes to receive help, isn't it? It's difficult to receive a gift of love. We immediately want to pay it back, and the Jewish Christians in this town can never pay this back. It's difficult to receive help, especially from those that maybe we are inclined to look down upon.

And that was a problem in the first century Church, but even in the Church today, disunity, and the struggle to receive help and love and care from one another, it persists. And we as a people, we got to be on guard against it. We said a number of weeks ago that there's no perfect church. But I don't believe there's a

community upon the earth that is quite like the Church. It is the only community upon the earth where genuine love within its members is possible, because it's the only community within which the Spirit of God is actively at work transforming lives. Only the Church.

Now, I know that there's no perfect church. I know that we're a messy bunch. But I think you can agree with me that what Paul here describes—this extravagant love for one another, this willingness to surrender even certain freedoms for the sake of the faith of a weaker brother or sister, this striving after unity, this serving Christ by serving one another—I think we can all agree this is incredibly attractive. This would be an experience we would love to step into. This is what God calls us to be.

You know, one of my favorite things that we do at Lincoln Brean is something we did a little bit earlier. It might seem small to you, but it's very significant to me. And it's that we pray for other churches in our city. It's one of my favorite things that we do, and, you know, it could just pass us by, but when we do that, that's an acknowledgment these are our brothers and sisters.

Now these churches we pray for, there are some things we disagree with them about—non-essential matters—but what we never lose sight of is, we are unified. We have unity because on essential things, we have locked arms. We are together for the gospel. We follow the same Lord. We want to lift them up. We want to pray for them. We would pray that God would do great things through them. There's no part of us, of our staff, of our elders that ever think, you know, we got it all figured out. We're the best church in town. That attitude has no place in the Church. We're all striving together to see our city be reached, to see people's lives transformed, to see people have hope.

There's nothing I long for more as a pastor than that the churches of this town would be united in Christ Because when we are, it glorifies God and it serves as a witness to a watching world. If that's who we long to be, of course the place that starts is right here within our very walls, that we seek to love one another this way. And I think this is the right word—I'm so proud of this church. Because this church has an incredible legacy of unity.

Do you know how rare it is to have a church that hasn't had a church split? It's incredible thing. Do you know how rare it is to have two senior pastors that both serve for about 30 years? That is remarkable. That's something that God has done in this church and just like Paul commended the Romans, I want to commend you as a body. What a joy. During these months since Brian fully retired, I just want to acknowledge that for our staff, for me, for my family, this church has been so loving and so kind. I want to thank you and affirm you for that.

But I also want to urge us to never settle. To continue to press forward to be people of genuine love. To seek to serve and love one another, to strive after unity. Unity is so critical for us as a people. It's so critical because we are people who long to worship the living God, and we want to see his name be worshiped more and more by all the peoples of the earth. And when we are unified, it brings him glory.

Our Father, we thank you. We thank you for the incredible work of the cross. We thank you that while our world is filled with fighting and division and unity and strife, that you have created a people that can live differently. Lord, we seek to follow Jesus Christ, and seek to model the very behavior he taught us and empowers us to walk in through his Spirit and by your grace. We pray, Lord, that you would be glorified as we strive for unity. Lord, we can't do it on our own. This is not anything we can do in our strength. And so we pray that you would help us do it. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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